



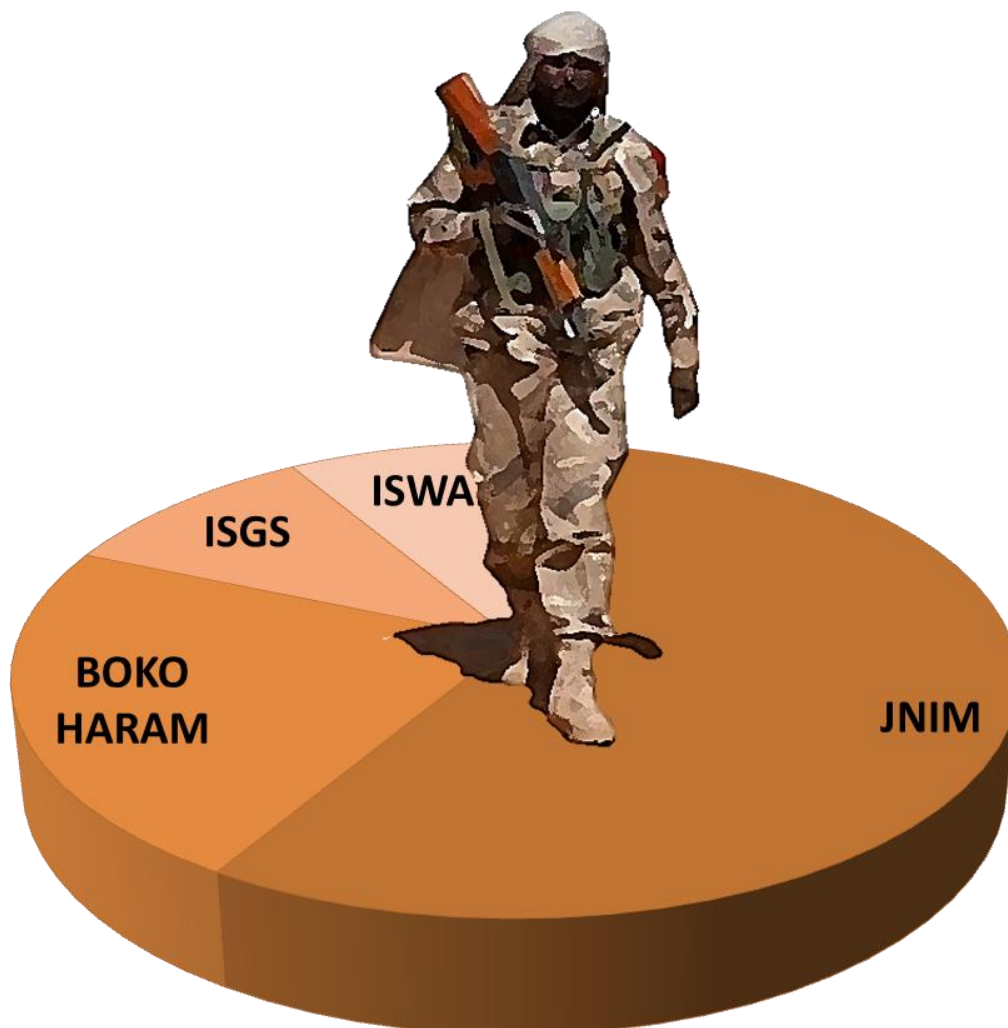
NATO Strategic Direction - South



“Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures”

3rd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACSRST Four-Monthly Report

Jan 2019 – Dec 2020



**NSD-S HUB**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020 was a year of contrasting positive and negative aspects in the Fight against Terrorism in the Sahel. On the one hand, it was not only the most intense year in terms of terrorist activity but also a period when the geographical dispersion of violence evolved notably. On the other hand, the lethality of attacks by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Organizations (TVEOs¹) reduced significantly, disagreements between JNIM and the ISGS led to many clashes (following years of cohabitation and even cooperation) which caused a decrease in both of their combat resources and, finally, Counter-Terrorism (CT) efforts seemed to have been more effective. In other words, the geographical dispersion of terrorist activities in the Sahel does not necessarily reflect stronger and more capable TVEOs.

The following more specific trends were also analysed:

- An increase of violence in Niger (+51% during the year 2020 and +85% during the last four-month period), especially noticeable in the Tillabéri region, an area rich in gold and other minerals;
- Better security trends in Burkina Faso where TVEO activities reduced by 12%;
- The risk of an expansion of JNIM activities into the south of Mauritania or Senegal;
- The presence of MLF in the border region of Kayes (Mali) was evidenced twice; area with an estimated 77% of Mali's gold production.
- The risk of an expansion of JNIM and ISGS also into the Gulf of Guinea countries in the mid/long-term.
- The consequences of the military coup in Mali and the COVID19 pandemic.

These TVEO trends could imply new challenges and threats for the Sahel and beyond in the mid-term. For this reason, it is necessary to anticipate CT awareness, capabilities and prevention activities as far as possible before terrorism activities take place.

¹ See Annex B and C for Definitions, concepts and acronyms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This third edition of the report “*Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures*” provides data and analysis relating to the period from January, 2019 to December, 2020 combining our previous works with two new four-month periods (see below for details).

The report’s findings and conclusions are cumulative, encompassing all of the data and analysis of the previous two reports. A comparison is made between the years 2019 and 2020 and particular emphasis is also put on the events during the last four months, including the impact of external factors which have directly affected TVEO activities.

Following the complete analysis of a two-year period, a broader and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of terrorism over time has been achieved, identifying new TVEO trends, capacity building and strategies in the Sahel region. Consequently, the deductions and conclusions are more comprehensive and precise.

As with its predecessors, the report begins with a quantitative approach, on the basis of which a qualitative analysis of the data was carried out (for further details of the methodology see Annex A).

This report is divided as follows:

- Period A: Jan 2019 – Apr 2019
- Period B: May 2019 – Aug 2019
- Period C: Sep 2019 – Dec 2019
- Period D: Jan 2020 – Apr 2020
- Period E: May 2020 – Aug 2020
- Period F: Sep 2020 – Dec 2020

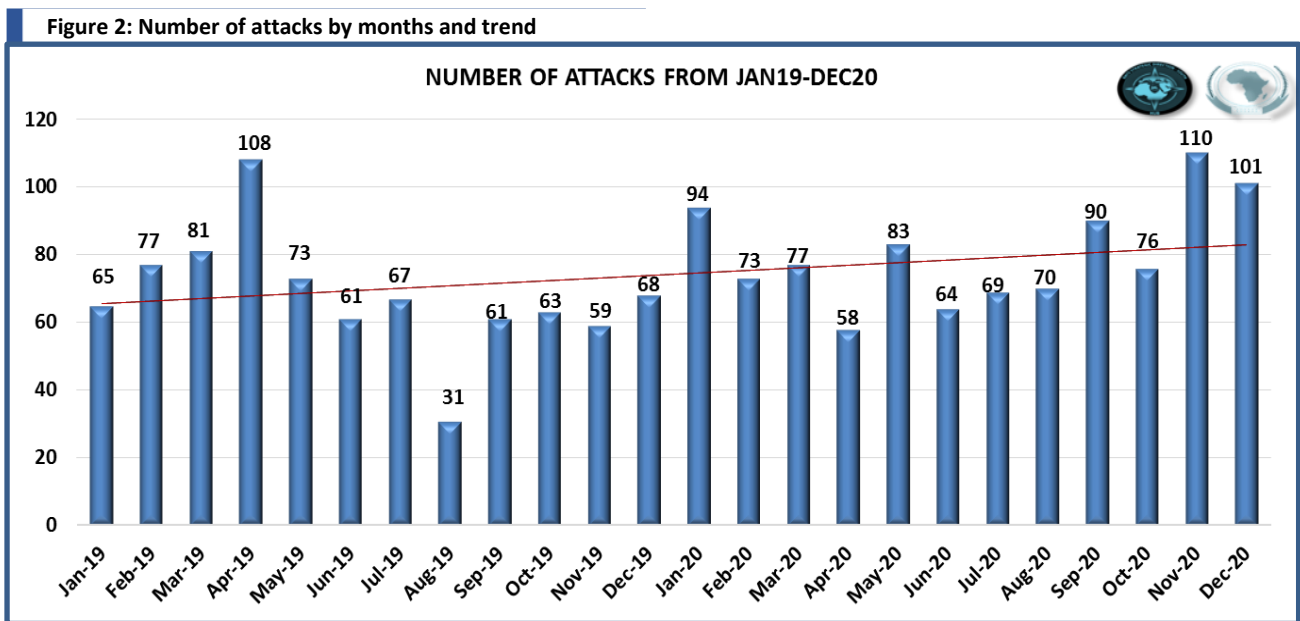
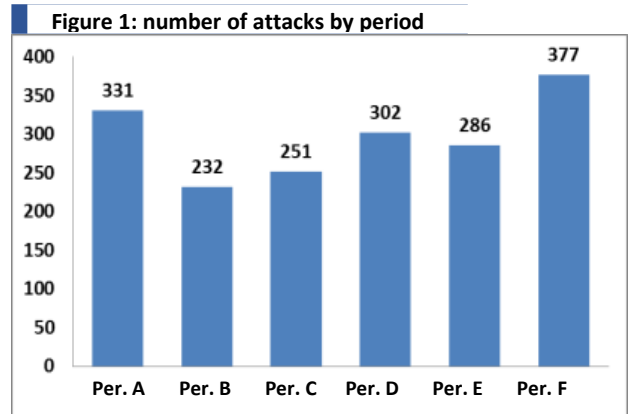


2. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

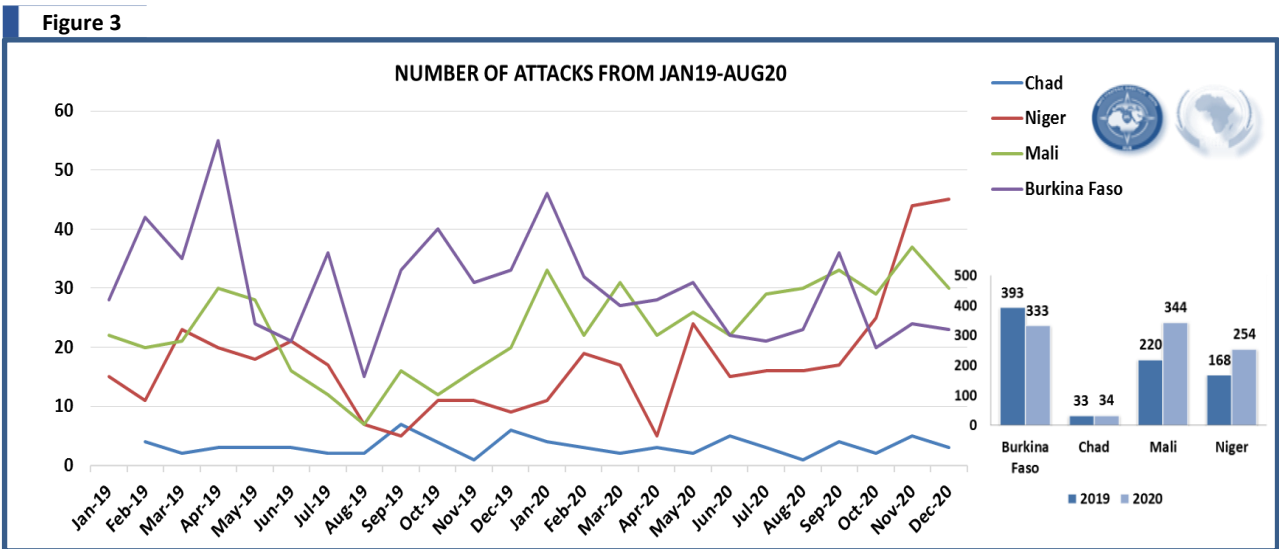
As with previous reports, a detailed quantitative analysis of terrorist activity, the geographical areas affected, the primary terrorist groups involved, their targets, fatalities, lethality and tactics, techniques and procedures used in their attacks will be presented first. However, this report takes a cumulative approach, gathering the data relating to the entire two-year period, so that the trends can be demonstrated in a practical manner. To further emphasise this, a comparison between 2019 and 2020 is followed by more particular focus on the most recent period in order to demonstrate the current effects of the trends in the Sahel and beyond.

2.1. Number of Terrorist Attacks

The total number of terrorist attacks increased by 18.5% in 2020, with 151 more attacks, which translates to an average of 80 attacks per month. Subsequent to the encouraging slight decrease during Period E, the highest increase of the 31.8% was then observed during the last four months, Period F (see fig. 1), due to the highest number of attacks during November and December, 2020 (see fig. 2).

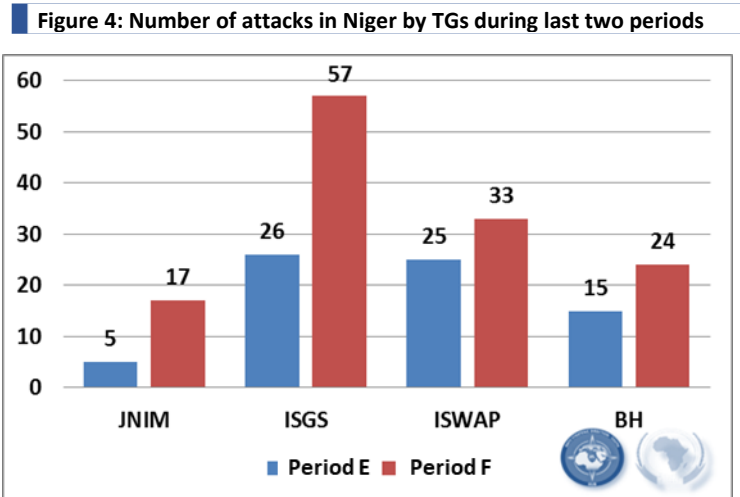


According to figure 3, despite the rising trend in the Sahel area as a whole, Burkina Faso recorded a significant reduction in terrorism attacks (-15.2%) and there were no significant changes in Chad and Mauritania. Indeed, the latter has recorded no terrorism attacks at all since 2011. On the other hand, the worst percentage figures came from Mali (+56.4%) and Niger (+51.2%).



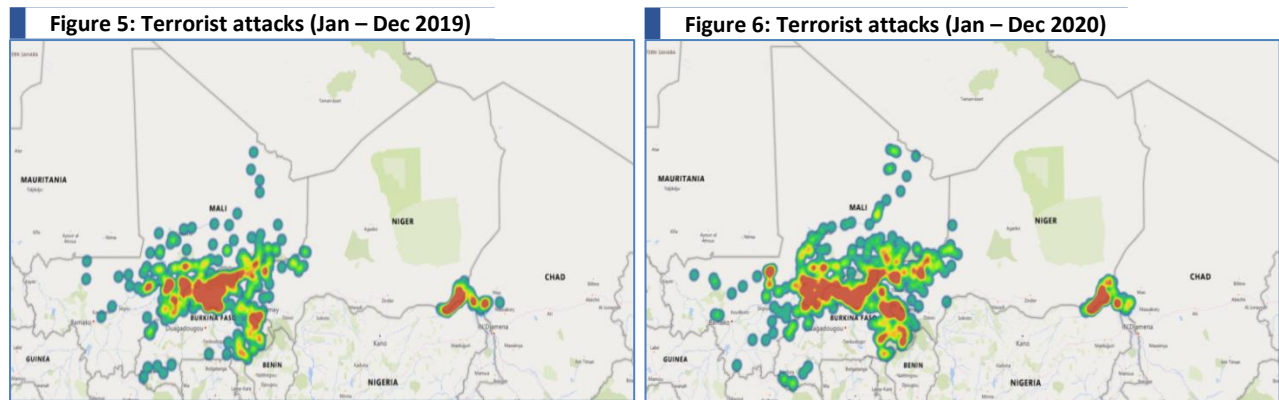
In terms of the cumulative number of attacks carried out by all of the terrorist groups during 2020, the greatest increase was seen in Mali.

Niger, for the first time during the entire period of analysis, recorded the highest monthly number of attacks in November and December, 2020 (fig.3). The trend of increasing number of attacks (52 in Period D, 71 in Period E and 131 in Period F) was especially worrying in Period F, when there was an 84.5% increase compared to the previous period. Fig.4 shows the evolution of activities committed by TVEOs during these same two periods. The highest increase took place in the western part of Niger, mostly by ISGS, but also the activity of JNIM appears to be growing. Some explanations for this trend are provided in chapter 3 (qualitative analysis).



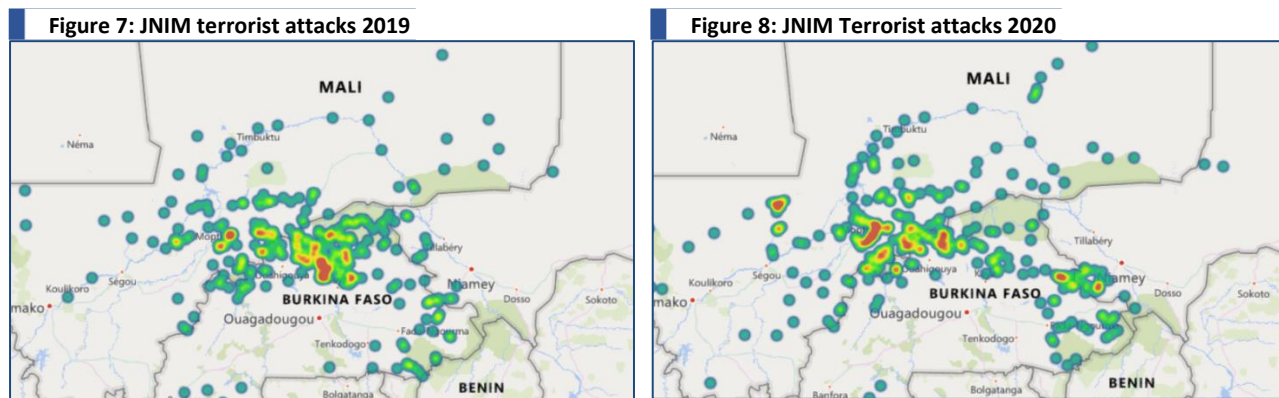
2.2. Location of Terrorist Attacks

Figures 5 and 6 below show the geographical location of all terrorist attacks in the region in 2019 and 2020. The predictions included in our [second report](#) concerning TVEO “migration” have been confirmed. The trends relate primarily to: the *decrease* of TVEO attacks in the centre-north of Mali; and the *increase* in central-western Mali, and western Niger. Activity data in Burkina Faso can be interpreted confusingly and it will be necessary to confirm their evolution before ensuring a decrease/increase in some areas.



Although an overall increase in the number of attacks is relatively evident in the above maps, it is useful to break these numbers down into which groups carried out which attacks and where. This is particularly relevant to assess the relative trends for each terrorist group in order to identify potential strategies to challenge such activity and to increase awareness and common understanding of the threat of terrorism in the Sahel.

The maps below show that JNIM has evolved towards the Mopti area, south-eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger (west of Niamey in the Tilabéri region). Even though the numbers of attacks are not quite so relevant now, some attacks by JNIM were registered in gold mining areas of Mali. The increase in the number of attacks in south-eastern Burkina Faso/south-western Niger corresponds to an area with relevant smuggling routes.



ISGS “migrated” most of its activities from northern Burkina Faso to its central-northern and eastern areas and, more specifically into Niger, increasing its activities both along and across the border area between Burkina Faso and Niger and central Mali and Niger. ISGS is the most active TG in the Gao Region (Mali) where they intensified their activities in 2020.

Figure 9: ISGS terrorist attacks 2019

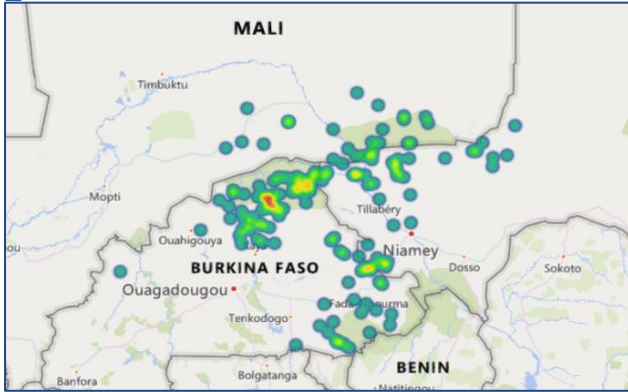
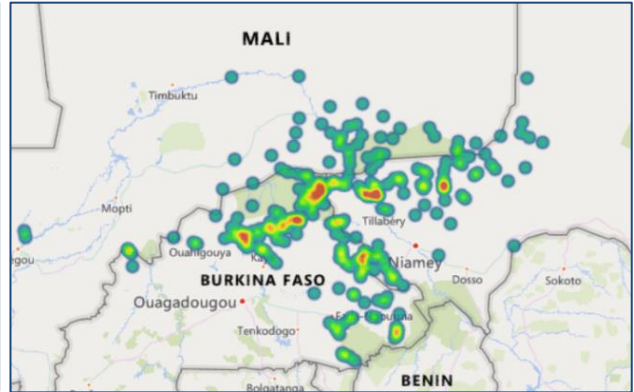


Figure 10: ISGS terrorist attacks 2020



ISWAP, on the other hand, “migrated” most of its activities in the Lake Chad basin area towards the border with Niger by reducing its activities in Chad. As is shown in the maps below, most of their activities took place along cross-border areas.

Figure 11: ISWAP terrorist attacks 2019

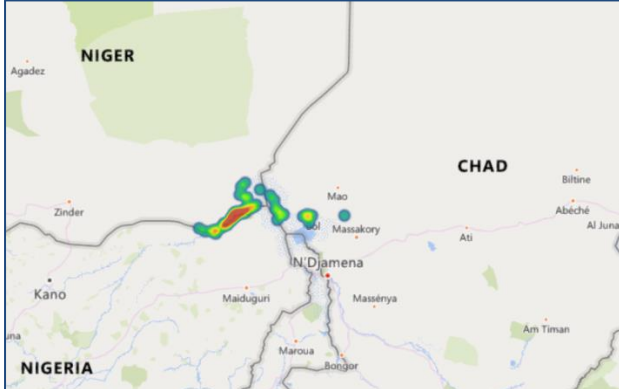
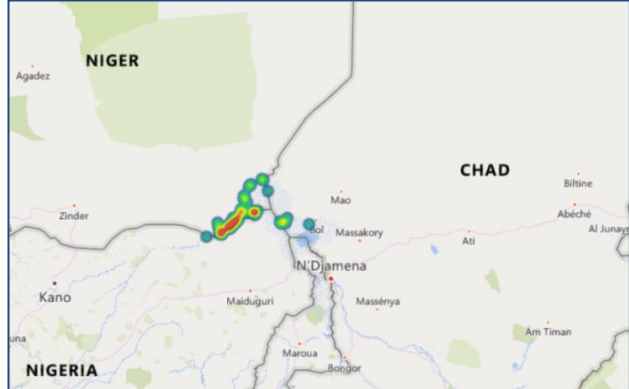


Figure 12: ISWAP terrorist attacks 2020



Boko Haram, while increasing its level of activities in Niger, also intensified its attacks towards Chad, becoming the main terrorist group acting in Chad.

Figure 13: Boko Haram terrorist attacks 2019

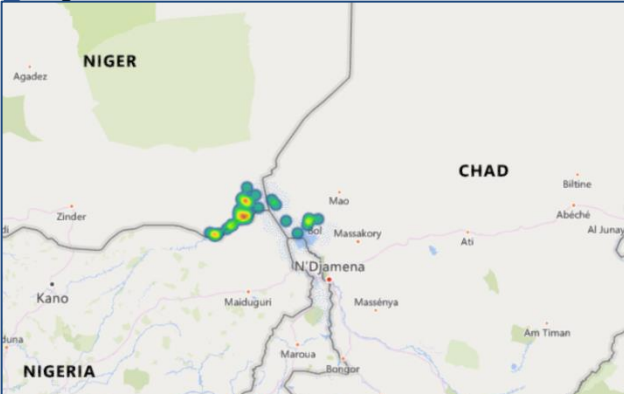
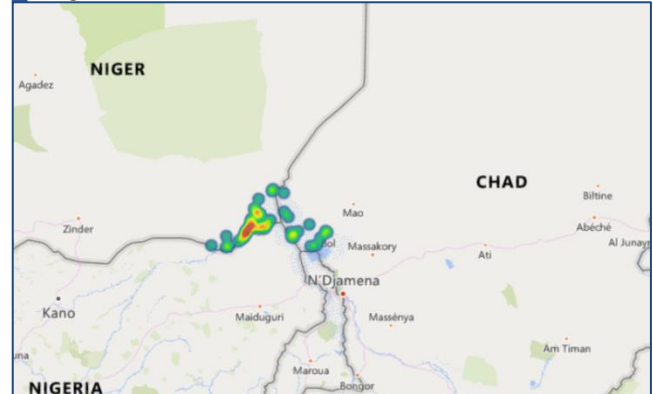
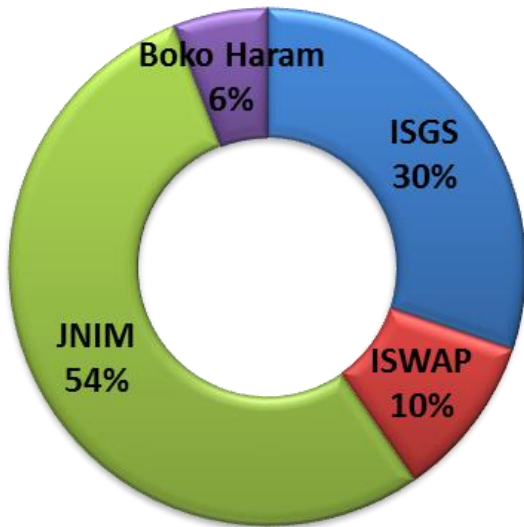


Figure 14: Boko Haram terrorist attacks 2020



2.3. Terrorist Attacks by Groups

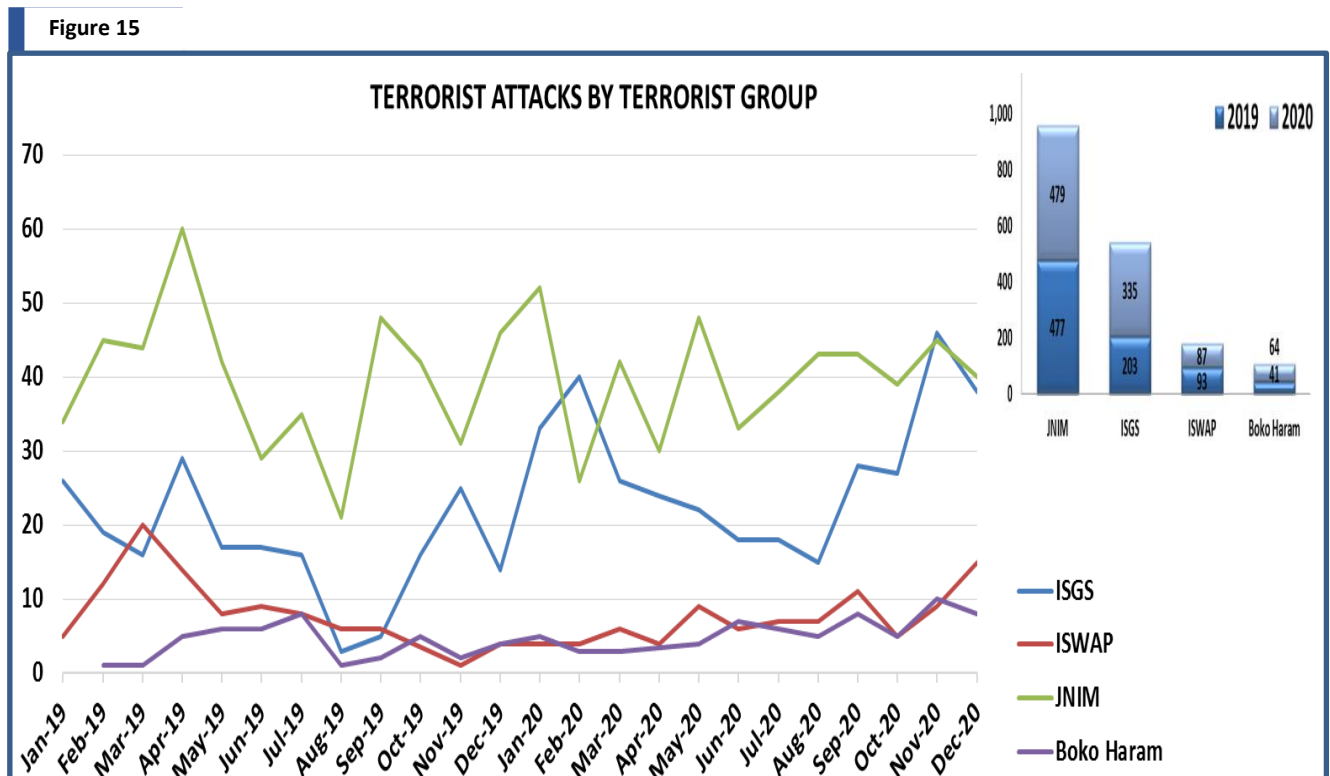


The diagram to the left and figure 15 show a comparison of the level of activities of terrorist groups in terms of numbers of attacks during 2019 and 2020. As shown, the quantity of activities by TVEOs affiliated to Al Qaida and Daesh were relatively similar.

ISGS significantly increased its activities during the last four-month period, reversing its downward trend during the previous period. This trend was quite intense in the last two months of 2020 when comparing to attacks attributed to JNIM.

JNIM remains the most active group in the Sahel recording 477 attacks in 2019 and 479 in 2020, thus an average of 40 attacks per month.

The activities of ISWAP, the main TVEO in the Lake Chad Basin, slightly decreased in 2020 (down by 6.5%) due to decreased activities in Chad (-42%). Meanwhile, Boko Haram increased its activities (+56%) in both Niger (+37%) and Chad (+122%).



The following graphic (fig. 16) indicates the number of attacks by each terrorist group in each country over the past two years. JNIM was the main actor in Mali and Burkina while ISGS was the most active group in Niger and ISWAP in Chad. Niger is the only country where the all four TVEO groups were active but also, as stated previously, where the number of attacks grew larger during periods E and F.

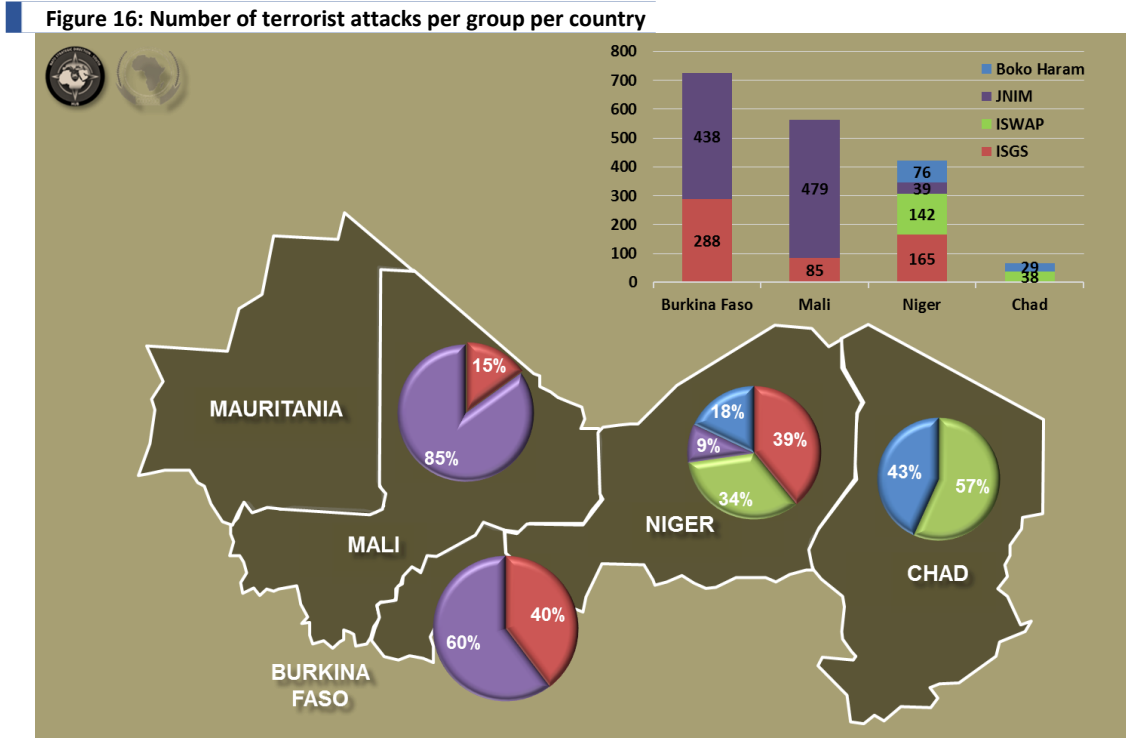


Fig. 17 illustrates that JNIM increased the number of attacks carried out in Mali (+52%) and Niger (+125%), while significantly decreasing its activity in Burkina Faso (-41%).

On the other hand, ISGS notably increased its attacks in Burkina Faso (+44%) while it doubled its activities in Niger and also increased its attacks in Mali in 2020 (+83%).

ISWAP significantly reduced its attacks in Chad while slightly increasing its attacks in Niger (+6%) where it conducts most of its attacks (84%).

Boko Haram seemed to focus its activities on Chad. Finally, it is important to note that the number of attacks in Niger grew by 84.5% during the last four-month period.

Figure 17: TVEO activities by year and country

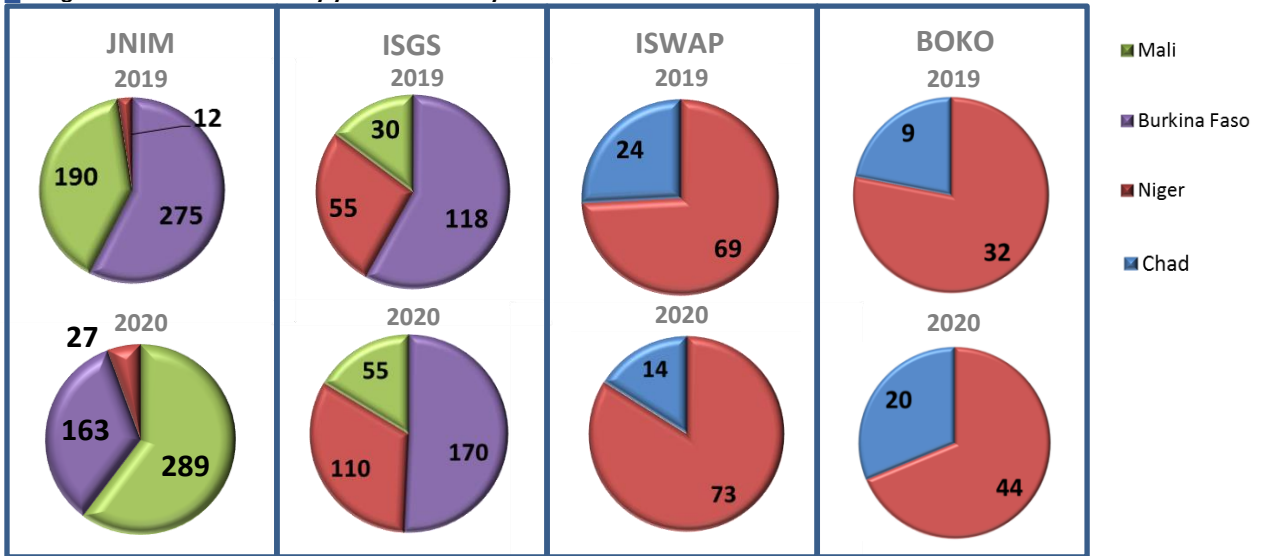


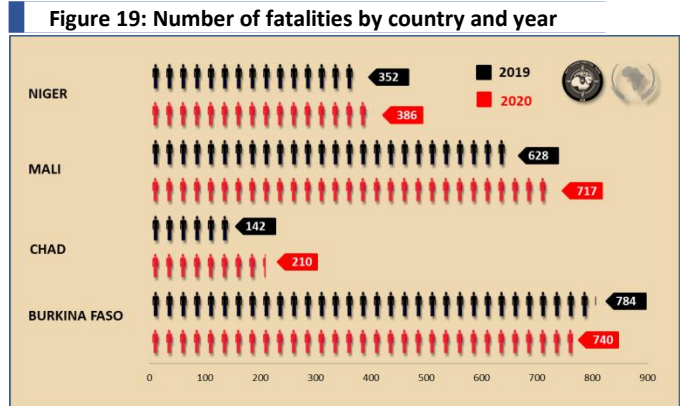
Fig. 18 incorporates all sets of data for 2019 and 2020 and highlights the most lethal group per type of target. Regarding the number of attacks, it can be seen that all of the terrorist groups prioritized civilian targets, except JNIM, which also targeted Armed and Security Forces (ASF). It is remarkable to note that despite Boko Haram being less active compared to other TVEOs, it was the most lethal (fatalities per attack, f.p.a.).

Figure 18: TVEO activities by year and country

TERRORISM ATTACKS/FATALITIES JAN19-DEC20 BY TERRORIST GROUP AND TYPE OF OBJECTIVE					
TYPE OF OBJECTIVE	ASF	ADM	CIV	IO	
JNIM	330 (579 FATALITIES)	75 (45 FATALITIES)	476 (1183 FATALITIES)	75 (51 FATALITIES)	956 (1858 FATALITIES)
ISGS	111 (489 FATALITIES)	69 (60 FATALITIES)	348 (872 FATALITIES)	10 (1 FATALITIES)	538 (1422 FATALITIES)
BH	17 (143 FATALITIES)	3 (3 FATALITIES)	84 (158 FATALITIES)	1 (2 FATALITIES)	105 (306 FATALITIES)
ISWAP	46 (208 FATALITIES)	7 (1 FATALITIES)	123 (158 FATALITIES)	4 (6 FATALITIES)	180 (373 FATALITIES)
	504 (1419 FATALITIES)	154 (109 FATALITIES)	1031 (2371 FATALITIES)	90 (60 FATALITIES)	1779 (3959 FATALITIES)

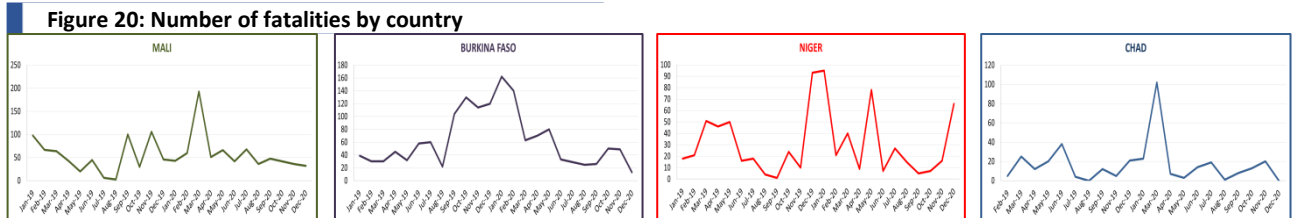
2.4. Fatalities

There were 3,959 victims of terrorism in the Sahel during the two-year period, with an increase of 7.7% in 2020 (1,906 in 2019 and 2,053 in 2020). Although the total number of fatalities increased in most countries in 2020, there was a decrease in Burkina Faso (-5.6%) despite the rising trend in the number of victims during the last four-month period.

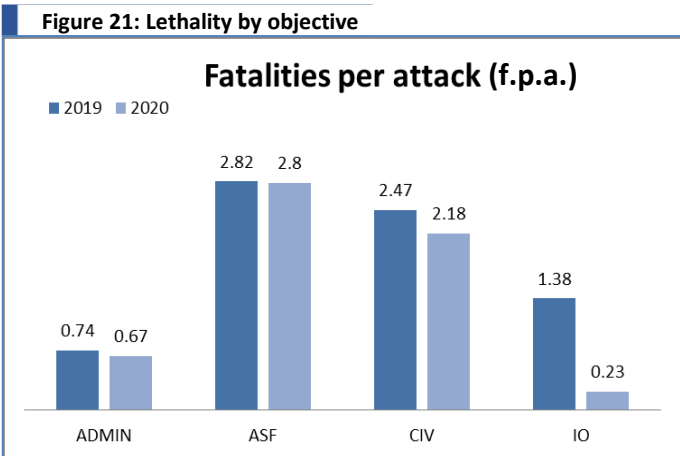


There are three relevant circumstances which should be mentioned:

- Periods C and D were the most lethal. The trend appeared to go down after the arrival of COVID19 to these countries.
- The number of fatalities in Burkina Faso increased significantly during Period C and D, compared to period A when there was the largest number of attacks in the country (see figure 3).
- The number of victims in Niger increased significantly during the last month.



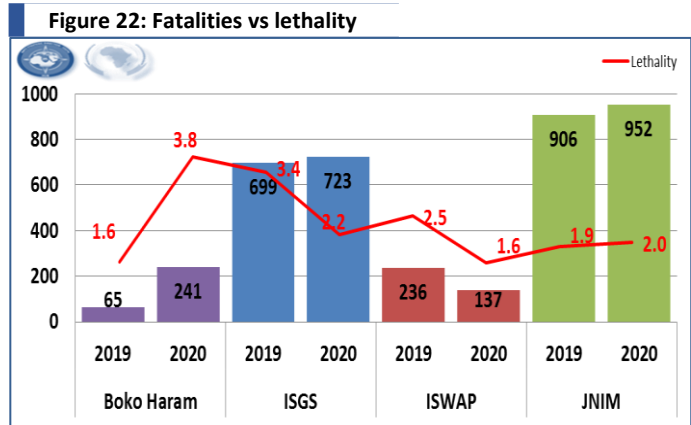
While the total number of attacks increased in accordance with the previous trend (+18.3%), there was a significant decrease in lethality in 2020 (-9%, down from 2.34 f.p.a. in 2019 to 2.13 f.p.a. in 2020) mainly due to the fewer number of civilian fatalities in this period. Another significant decrease is related to the lethality of the attacks against IOs going from 1.38 to 0.23 as is shown in fig. 21. Whether or not this is related to the Covid 19 restrictions will be looked at later.



Not all terrorist organizations had similar lethality trends. In fact, as is shown in fig. 22, while for ISGS and ISWAP there was a significant reduction in 2020 (-35% and -36% respectively) JNIM

remained stable and Boko Haram increased significantly (+137%), becoming the most lethal in the Sahel.

Despite the general reduction of lethality in 2020, the three most lethal attacks during the periods of analysis took place during Period D and were performed by JNIM (103 fatalities), Boko Haram (101 fatalities) and ISGS (89 fatalities). These “peaks” are shown in fig. 20 (previous page).



2.5. Targets

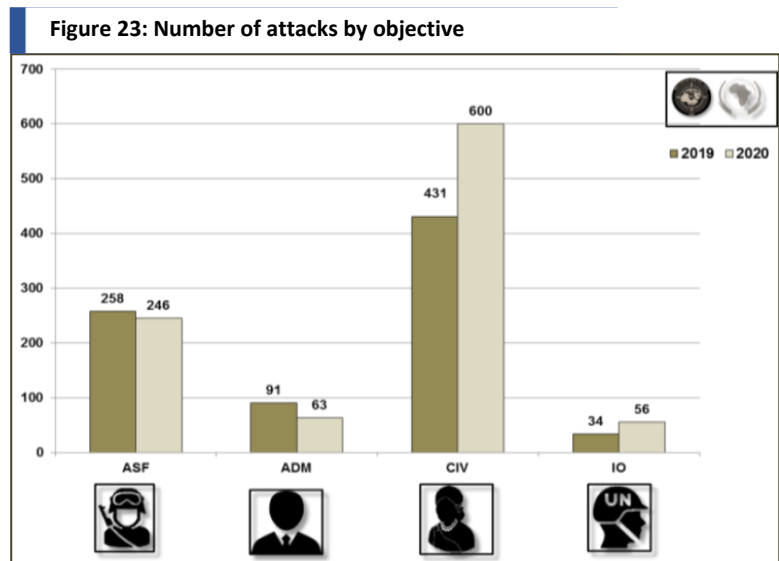
Comparing the figures in 2019 and 2020 (see fig. 23), the majority of the targets and the greatest increase in the number of attacks were civilian (CIV) throughout (+39%), despite a reduction after the spread of Covid 19 in the Sahel (April, 2020).

Dramatically less than for CIV targets, the number of attacks against IOs increased in 2020 (+65%), although the number of victims decreased significantly by -75% (52 in 2019 and 13 in 2020). In 2020, these attacks were mainly committed by JNIM (89%) while using IED (9 IED victims and 2 by SALW), which might indicate a change in strategy. On the other hand, the number of attacks against Administrative targets (ADM) decreased that year (-27%).

The following infographics summarize the most relevant data and trends regarding each of the target types.

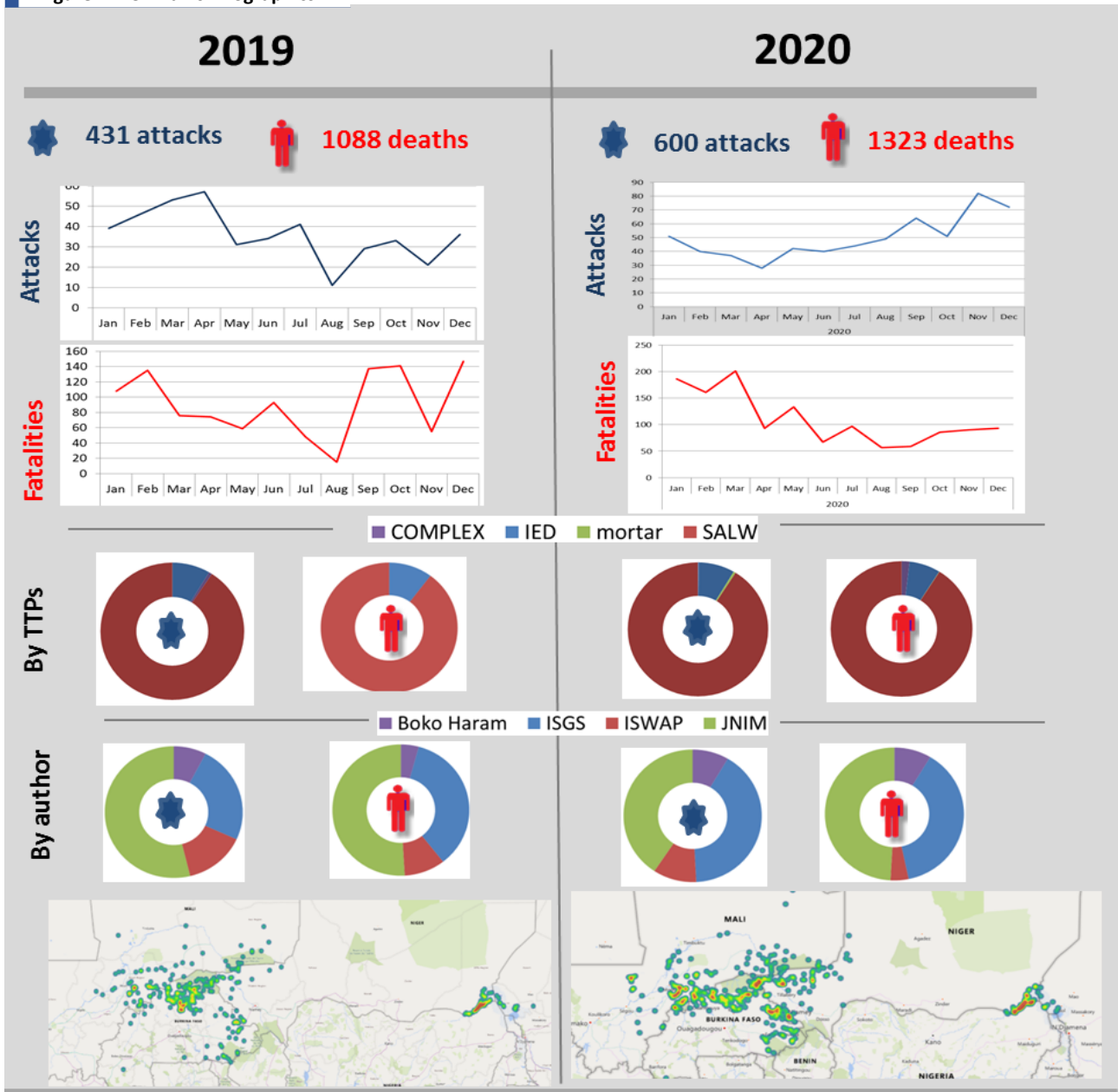
2.5.1. Attacks against Civilians

Civilians were the main target group for TVEOs both in 2019 and 2020. It is of note that the increase in attacks in Period F was not reflected in an increase in the number of fatalities, which was the opposite to what happened in Period D, when fewer attacks provoked a larger number of fatalities. Although SALW was, by far, the favourite Tactics, Technics and Procedure (TTP) used by TVEOs to attack civilians, a wide spectrum of TTPs were used to attack and kill



civilians in 2020. JNIM reduced its number of attacks in 2020 but recorded of the same number of victims. There was a high increase of civilian fatalities in 2020 in Niger.

Figure 24: Civilian's infographics

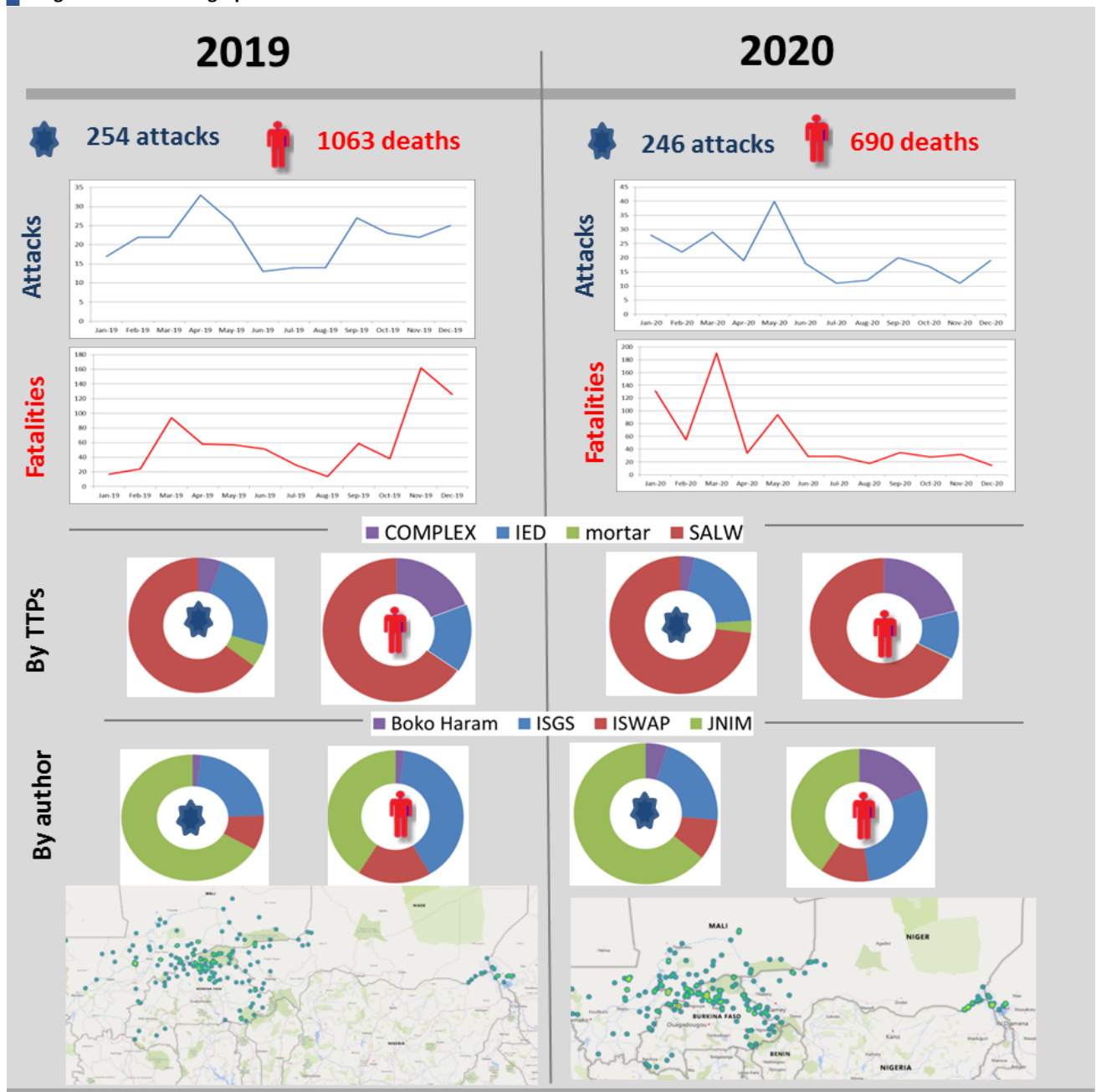


2.5.2. Attacks against Armed Security Forces

Both number of attacks and fatalities related to Armed Security Forces (ASF) reduced in 2020. SALW was again the favourite TTP used by TVEOs to attack ASF. Complex attacks were more lethal in 2020, mainly due to two attacks which took place in Period D.

JNIM continued to record the highest number of the attacks against ASF. ISGS decreased its percentage of the number of victims in 2020. Finally, Boko Haram significantly increased its ratios in 2020. There was a high increase of ASF fatalities along the cross-border between Niger and Burkina Faso.

Figure 25: ASF's infographics

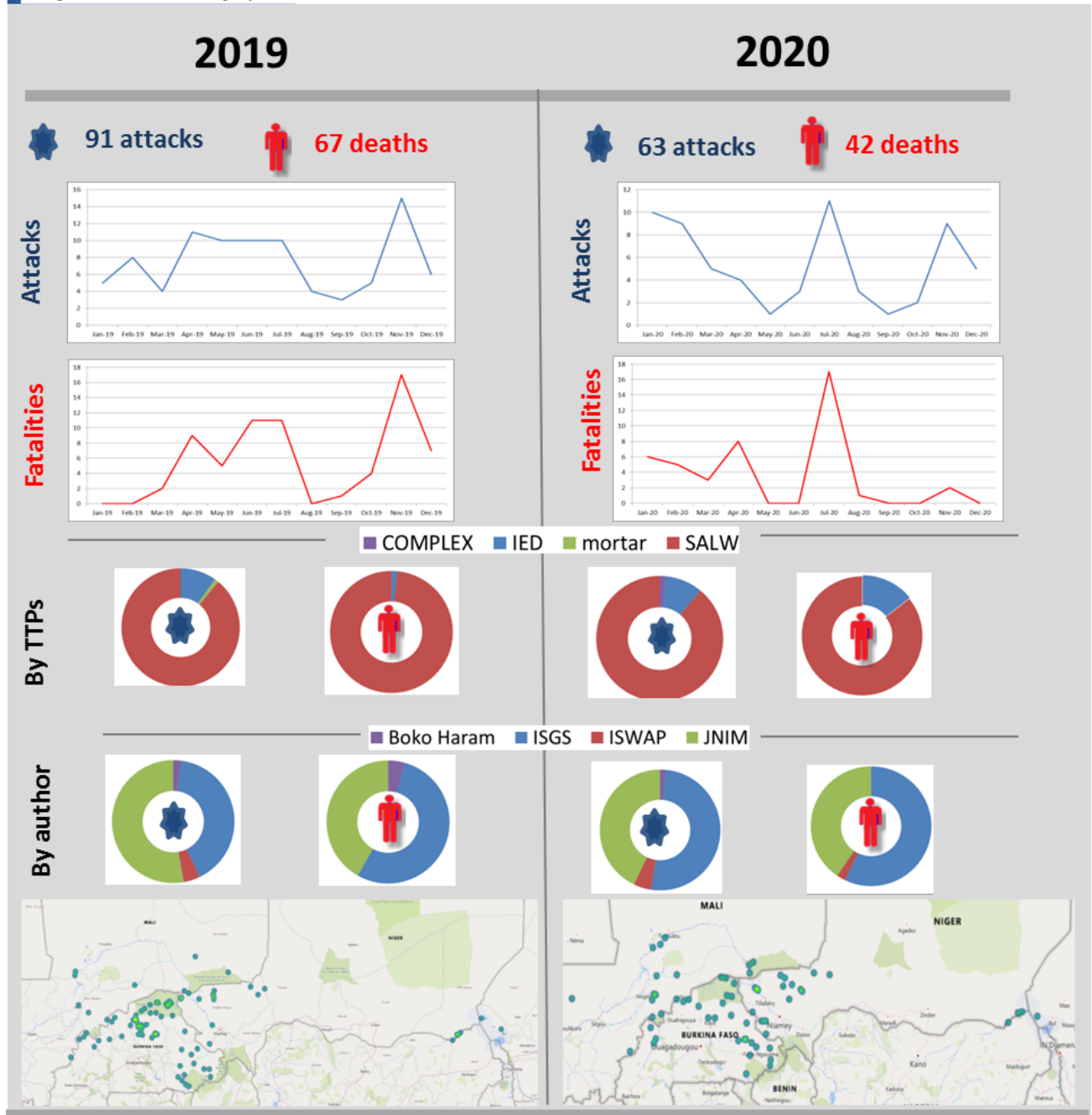


2.5.3. Attacks against administrative targets

Attacks against administrative personnel reduced in 2020. In particular, lethality dropped in period F. SALW was the favourite TTP used by TVEOs to attack ADM. In 2020, the use of IEDs became more widespread and relevant, as well as the related number of fatalities.

ISGS was the most lethal TVEO against ADM in 2020. The number of attacks in eastern Burkina Faso and in Niger increased in 2020.

Figure 26: ADM's infographics

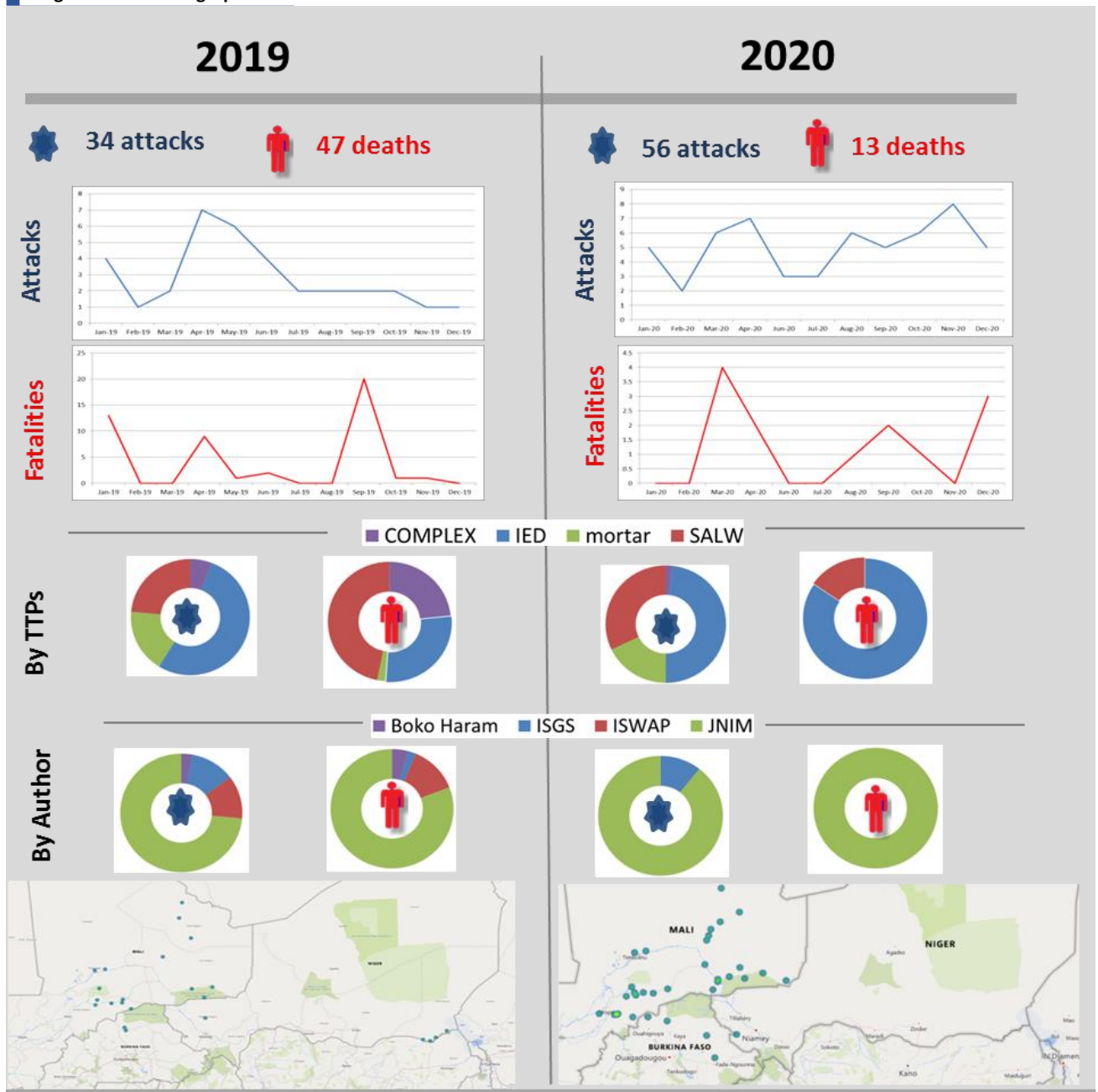


2.5.4. Attacks against International Organizations

Despite an increase in the number of attacks against IO in periods E and F, the lethality decreased significantly during the same period.

Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) were the TTP which caused the greatest number of IO-member fatalities in 2020 (85%), corresponding to 11 of the total number of 13 IO-member deaths, all of which were attributed to JNIM.

Figure 27: IO's infographics



2.6. Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

In 2019 and 2020, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) were the most used TTP. The use of SALWs exponentially increased in 2020.

IEDs were mainly used by JNIM (8-10 per month) and much less by ISGS (1-2 per month).

Fig. 29, relating to the entire period of analysis, shows that complex attacks were by far the most lethal TTP. Nevertheless, the most common are SALW, causing the most victims, being the second most lethal TTP. Mortar attacks were very unusual and their lethality quite low. Boko Haram is the most lethal terrorist group (2.9 f.p.a.) in both TTPs they use: IEDs (3 f.p.a.) and SALWs (2.9 f.p.a.). On the other hand, JNIM is the least lethal group (1.9 f.p.a.), mainly due to its SALW attacks having such a low lethality (2.1).

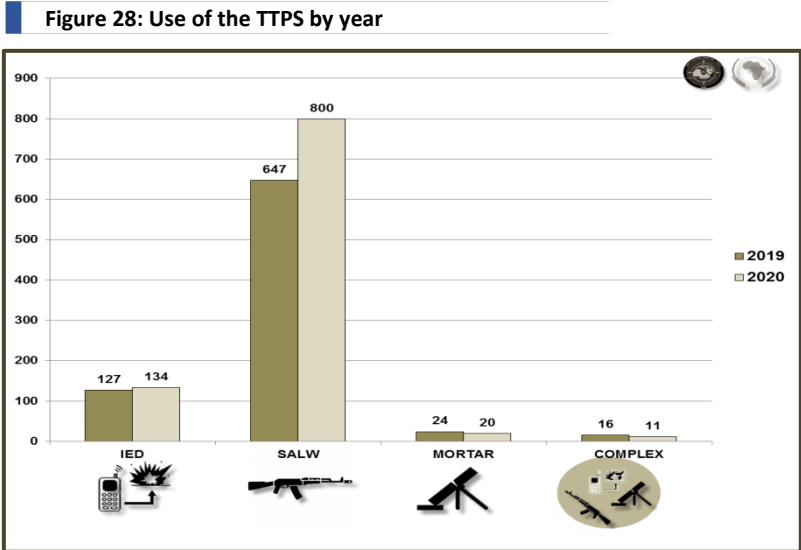


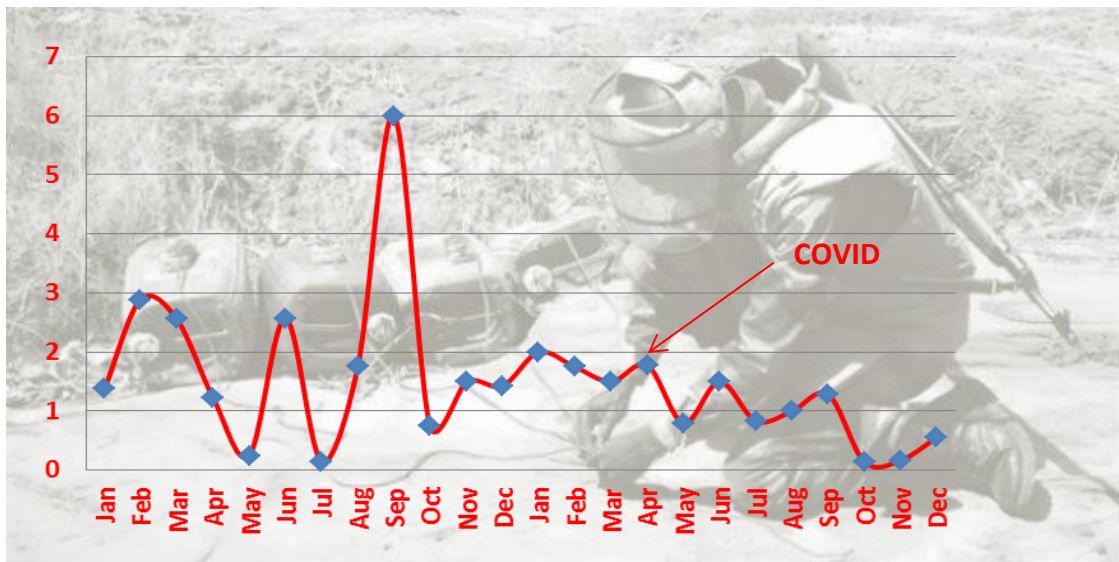
Figure 29

TERRORIST ATTACKS JAN19-DEC20 BY TERRORIST GROUP AND TTP

TYPE OF OBJECTIVE	IED	SALW	MORTAR	COMPLEX	
JNIM	197 (293 FATALITIES)	716 (1471 FATALITIES)	28 (2 FATALITIES)	15 (92 FATALITIES)	956 (1858 FATALITIES)
ISGS	30 (38 FATALITIES)	492 (1171 FATALITIES)	6 (1 FATALITIES)	10 (212 FATALITIES)	538 (1422 FATALITIES)
BH	10 (30 FATALITIES)	95 (276 FATALITIES)	0 (0 FATALITIES)	0 (0 FATALITIES)	105 (306 FATALITIES)
ISWAP	24 (62 FATALITIES)	144 (295 FATALITIES)	10 (0 FATALITIES)	2 (16 FATALITIES)	180 (373 FATALITIES)
	261 (423 FATALITIES)	1477 (3213 FATALITIES)	44 (3 FATALITIES)	27 (320 FATALITIES)	1779 (3959 FATALITIES)

IEDs, which were the most used TTP against IO members, were mainly used by JNIM. Although the group maintained the same number of attacks (8-10 per month), the lethality decreased significantly since the outbreak of COVID 19 in the Sahel, as can be seen in figure 30.

Figure 30: Reduction of the JNIM’s IED lethality since COVID-19



3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

An in-depth qualitative analysis of the 2-year period has been conducted utilising the information provided in section 2, based on a mix of literary research and knowledge acquired over the reporting period.

3.1. Number of Terrorist Attacks

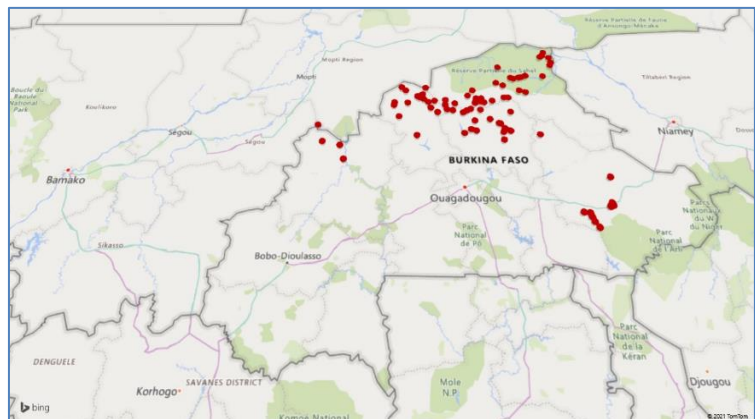
2020 was not only the most intense year in terms of terrorist activity, but also a period with notable developments in the geographical dispersion of violent terrorist activity due to there were 151 more attacks mainly in Niger and Mali.

Nevertheless, for the first time since 2016, Burkina Faso registered a reduction in terrorist activity, with the number of terrorist acts dropping by a slim margin but still stood. Very likely, the decrease was the result of a number of concurring factors amongst which several are worthy of mention:

- Primarily, Burkina Faso has shown an ever increasing commitment to fighting terrorism, with the defence budget jumping from US\$205 million in 2017 to US\$373 million in 2019, which corresponds to an 80% increase. Considering the inherent delays in military capability building, it is possible that 2020 was the year when previous investments started to pay off.

- Secondly, the implementation of the “Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland” (VDP) mechanism, created in early 2020, where volunteer fighters established self-defence groups with the support of the government,² is likely to have contributed to the positive outcome. The confrontations between VDP – at times partnering Burkinabe defence and security forces – and TVEOs, resulted in 154 terrorists

Figure 31: Actions by the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland



and 110 militiamen being killed in 71 documented incidents. However, the establishment of the volunteer force has not always been regarded as a positive development. Loose legislation allows the new forces to operate freely and with little accountability, which led to abuses against civilians on ethnic criteria. VDP units, individually or part of larger military forces, have caused the death of 91 civilians – most of whom are of Fulani ethnicity – in 27 documented violent incidents.

² The government is supposed to provide volunteers with 14-day training and combat equipment weaponry included.

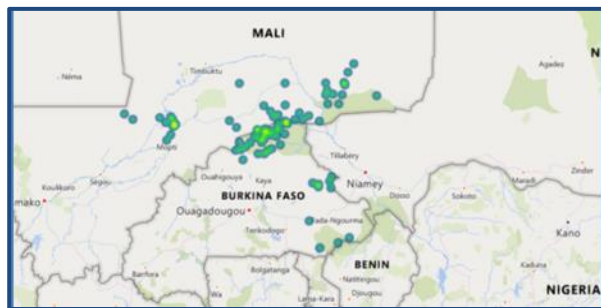
Therefore, in spite of the short-term success, the abuse of power by the volunteer groups may create the conditions for the radicalization of the population in the medium- to long-terms.

- Thirdly, the high concentration of CT operations conducted by international, regional and national forces in the tri-border area during 2020, with a focus in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, has likely led the TVEOs to partially relocate their operations outside the region into Mali and Niger, both of which recorded an increase in violence.
- Fourthly, the conflictual relationship between JNIM and ISGS, which exploded in 2020, has likely led the groups to employ part of their resources for fighting each other, thus reducing activity against traditional targets.

Figure 32: JNIM vs ISGS 2019



Figure 33: JNIM vs ISGS 2020



3.2. Location of Terrorist Attacks

Niger saw an upsurge of terrorist activity of more than 50% in 2020 compared with the previous year. With the most significant increment being recorded over the course of the last four months of 2020, the growth in violence was likely determined by the Nigerien legislative and first round of presidential elections held on 27 December, 2020. Notably, all groups intensified their activity in Niger in late 2020, which supports the assessment of an overarching desire to sabotage the electoral process. The most important contribution to the increase is the continuous ISGS expansion from Mali southwards into the Tillabéri region, as well as a spill over of both JNIM and ISGS into Niger from the Burkina Faso side, possibly attracted by the potential income resulting from the control of gold mining in western Niger.

In **Mali**, terrorist activity intensified with 2020 figures showing an over 55% increment compared to 2019. This is largely attributable to the “return” of the MLF to the traditional operations area of Mopti, as well as the inroads made by the ISGS from their strongholds in the Menaka circle towards central Mali.

Surprisingly, the military coup which overthrew the former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita seems to have had a limited impact on the country’s security. The smooth transition to the transitional government, as well as the commitment made by the incoming political leaders to

continue the fight against terrorism with international support, have likely avoided potential disruptions which might have negatively affected the ongoing security efforts.

In addition, the slow but relatively constant increase of terrorist activity in the Lake Chad cluster also contributed to the outcome.

3.3. Terrorist Attacks by Groups

JNIM remains the most active group in the Sahel, accounting for more than half of the terrorist activity in the region. 2020 saw JNIM changing its geographical focus from Burkina Faso – where a majority of its attacks were conducted in 2019 – towards Mali. As highlighted in the previous report, the fact of a strategic retreat back into Mali can be linked to a series of both forced and deliberate decisions, amongst which:

- The uneven confrontation with the security forces in the Tri-border region: The high intensity of military operations conducted by Operation Barkhane, G5 Sahel and national security forces, particularly in northern Burkina Faso, has likely lowered JNIM's appetite for engagement in a region where they appear to be overwhelmed.
- The necessity to strengthen control in the Mopti stronghold. Starting from late 2019, groups of Fulani fighters have reportedly deserted the Macina Liberation Front - JNIMs most active formation - to join the ISGS ranks, a phenomenon which risked affecting the balance between the two rival groups. At the same time, the perspective of peace talks with the Malian government – an option confirmed lately by the transitional prime minister of Mali, Moctar Ouane in a December 2020 interview– requires JNIM to maintain a strong position in Mali. Finally, as the intercommunal conflicts between the herders and farmers usually degenerates into ethnic fights, mostly between the Fulani and the Dogon, it is likely that a high rate of MLF attacks are part of score-settling between the two groups.
- Partial loss of support in Burkina Faso: JNIM expansion in Burkina Faso in recent years has mostly been done through the MLF, who made use of their ethnic background to reach the Fulani community in Burkina Faso. Moreover, it is likely that in the initial phases of the expansion, MLF/JNIM assimilated many of the former Ansar ul-Islam cells, following the almost total dissolution of the later. In a similar fashion to what occurred in central Mali, the MLF/JNIM reportedly lost the loyalty of some of the local terrorist cells who found the radical ISGS approach more appealing.

The JNIM ambitions, however, are not limited to the territorial expansion southwards. By late 2020, information about a military base established by the MLF in the border region of Kayes during that year triggered concerns that the terrorist group might look to forward its operations into Senegal. Notably – although outside the timeframe of the current report – the suspicions

were to be confirmed when in January 2021 the Senegalese authorities dismantled a terrorist cell in the border town of Kidira with alleged connections to the MLF.

ISGS is gaining greater prominence so the activity in 2020 continued a rising trend compared to the previous year, despite a mid-year drop in intensity (March to August). In terms of geographical evolution, the ISGS expansion into Niger's Tillabéri region from north (Mali-Niger border) and east (Mali-Burkina Faso border) are the two major trends noted in 2020. Terrorist operations in the border regions are, in general, facilitated by the lower degree of control the security forces have in their more peripheral regions, but a series of particular factors might also have played a role in the aforementioned ISGS developments:

- Medium- to long-term effects of the 2018 anti-ISGS operations: In 2018, the Nigerian military partnered with Malian pro-Bamako militias of GATIA and MSA to fight the ISGS in the Tillabéri Niger-Mali border region. The alleged human rights abuses that occurred during the conduct of the operations, in particular those committed by the Malian militias against Nigerian Fulani – an extension of the ethnic conflict in which GATIA and MSA had been already involved in Mali – led to the radicalization of the affected local communities which resorted to ISGS protection as a result. The cessation of joint operations with Malian militias and the subsequent reconciliation efforts with the local communities delivered mixed results, with Niger being unable, at least in part, to regain the loyalty of the population.
- Reduced pressure from Malian militias: GATIA and MSA, the once major ISGS opponents in the Menaka region, have practically ceased hostilities against the later since 2019, allowing ISGS to recover and mount the ongoing “offensive” towards the south.
- Rational decision: Having their stronghold in the Menaka region of Mali, any serious ISGS attempts to expand into neighbouring territories have practically no options other than advancing southwards into Niger. In Mali, ISGS has very limited opportunities for exploiting ethnic fault lines, on which their strategy is heavily reliant. The northern parts of Mali are being heavily controlled by the Tuareg-based JNIM formations such as Ansar Dine. At the same time the MLF, despite reported losses due to defections, is still able to maintain a strong grip over the central part of the country.

ISWAP and **BH** continue to pose an important security challenge to Chad and Niger, although the majority of terrorist activity is being carried out in north-eastern Nigeria. At the same time, the areas of operations of the two terrorist groups have remained largely unchanged throughout the years. Niger continues to be the preferred target amongst the two Sahelian states, a situation that is likely determined by:

- Easier access into Niger through terrestrial routes, as opposed to Chad which is mostly accessible across Lake Chad waters.

- The proximity of the Chadian capital N'Djamena to Lake Chad determines a higher density of security forces in the region.
- The double security pressure on Niger, which is fighting terrorism on two fronts, is likely leading to a less than optimal security presence in the Lake Chad region.

3.4. Fatalities

The increase in fatalities from 2019 to 2020 is a direct effect of the increased attacks across the region. However, the increase in fatalities is disproportional, with an increase of 7.7% in fatalities compared to an 18.3% increase in attacks. It is likely that there are numerous influencing factors; not least is the effect of the world COVID 19 pandemic.

- **COVID19:** Across the Sahel countries there was a reduction of fatalities provoked by TVEOs at the start of the pandemic. Initial restrictions to control the virus impaired TVEO ease of movement and ability to bring logistical support into the area. This did then change due to enduring restrictions which presented additional recruiting opportunities for the TGs.
- **Unskilled fighting force:** The reduction in fatalities despite the increase in attacks would allude to a less skilled force, unable to receive enough basic forms of training. This is also partial fallout from COVID19, due to a lack of ability to conduct training during the reduced freedom of movement, compounded by the inability to move the skilled professionals conducting the training. In addition to an increase of troops in the area in anti-insurgency operations, the TGs have struggled to train their new recruits.
- **Increased recruiting:** There has been an increased recruiting pool for the TGs amongst the local population; desperation to make money has forced many down the TG path, due to a downturn in the world economy hit by the pandemic. These new recruits will not only receive a lower level of training to become fighters, but are also economic recruits as opposed to ideological.
- **Ethnic tensions:** As ISGS recruitment in Burkina Faso continues from disenfranchised Fulani and Fulani related Gourmance (ethnic groups); they are given a large amount of freedom by the ISGS leadership to settle domestic issues, which would also explain the large number of civilian targets.

As the world emerges from the pandemic, and the TVEOs are able to move and conduct training more freely, the force they currently have will likely become more affective, posing a stronger threat to the Sahel. The recruits gained are unlikely to leave the groups or return home.

COVID-19

As was said in our second report, the Covid-19 pandemic has generated negative consequences both in the economic and in the security domains. The economic downturn is likely to affect the defence budget and aggravate the socio-economic conditions, thus creating favourable conditions for terrorism to flourish. At the same time, health concerns lead to restrictions of movement for the security forces, which could translate into increased operational freedom for terrorist groups.

This could mean a double effect, as shown in the statistics: during the first months of the pandemic, terrorist activity came down, possibly due to preliminary results of the restriction of movement (ASF and IOs members) which implies fewer targets for the TVEOs and less opportunities to go unnoticed (302 attacks in period D and 286 attacks in period E). On the contrary, in period F a rebound effect was apparent when we faced the maximum level of TVEO activity in the Sahel with 377 attacks, which could be the result of the already mentioned economic and security deterioration.

3.5. Targets

3.5.1. Attacks against Civilians

In 2020 the number of attacks against civilians increased substantially compared to 2019. As already discussed the increased activity of ISGS in the Niger region had a significant effect on the numbers there. Additionally, the ethnic conflict which has occurred under the guise of TVEO activity can all be attributed to the increased civilian attacks, and as pointed out, much of the time it is different groups settling scores.

Although attacks increased against civilians, the number of fatalities did not increase proportionally. This would point towards the TTPs used by the TGs and the skill set of the fighters they are using, directly affected by the ability to train during the restrictions of COVID. The restrictions imposed by governments on their population as a means to control the spread of the virus also meant that there were fewer Civilians mulling around the streets to target.

This increase is likely to continue into 2021, unless ISGS are pushed out of the area and an effective military force holds it.

3.5.2. Attacks against Armed Security Forces

Lethality and attacks against ASF reduced during 2020. A number of factors would have been at play during this period. Mali was the main region for attacks against ASF, but with an uplift of troops into the area and more frequent operations, added to the fact that Covid19 reduced TVEO

mobility and logistics, their ability and effectiveness against the ASF was hindered, as reflected in the statistics. The reduction of more intricate attacks would suggest that the TVEO's are unable to bring the specialists required to co-ordinate such attacks and the equipment into the region.

As restrictions ease and the low skill levels of the current fighters increase, it is likely that TGs will return to more complex attacks and with greater numbers the bloodshed could be greater.

3.5.3. Attacks against Administrative Targets

The total number of attacks against administrative targets decreased from 2019 to 2020. This is unexpected considering the elections in Burkina Faso and Niger, and a military coup in Mali. With the decrease in attacks also came a decrease in the fatalities which reduced by 1/3. The decrease in attacks is likely due to the decreased TVEO skill-set. Administrative targets will have been heavily protected during the elections in Burkina Faso and Niger, therefore posing too hard a target for the TVEOs.

However with a referendum in Mali expected by May 2021, it is likely that the TVEOs will have had time to retrain and may start to be more ambitious. TVEO TTPs are currently unsophisticated with a lack of materials hindering more complex attacks but with the easing of restrictions, this could change in 2021.

3.5.4. Attacks against International Organizations

2020 saw almost a 100% increase in attacks against International Organizations, but a reduction of almost ¾ in the lethality. 2020 saw many NGOs reducing their overseas footprints, pulling many of their foreign nationals back home when COVID19 first hit. Military operations generally carried on as normal after a slight lull during the initial stages of the pandemic. With the uplift of foreign troops operating in Mali, this has presented a greater target for the TGs. As the increase in troops continues it is likely that so will the targeting, so the trend for a greater number of attacks against IOs will go on.

Additionally, the reduction in soft targets amongst the IO community has seen the lethality reduce. As many of the NGOs return in 2021, and attacks against IOs continue to rise, and we are likely to see an increase in lethality.

3.6. Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

As illustrated by the statistics, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) remain the favourite weapon for attacks. During 2020, this tactic showed the greatest growth, due to the ease of which one can recruit a relative amateur to "point and shoot". With the added fact that much of the local population in the region would already be in possession of their own weapons for self-defence, it makes for perfect recruiting.

3.7. CT activities

2020 saw significant changes in the approach to counter-terrorism in the Sahel. On 13 January, 2020 the Pau summit was not only an opportunity for the Heads of state of France and G5 Sahel countries to reaffirm their commitment for the fight against terrorism, but also it laid the foundations for one of the major rearrangements of the fight against terrorism in recent years. The establishment of the Coalition for the Sahel - which brings together France, G5 Sahel countries and other willing partners - allows for a more articulated response to the Sahel crisis by integrating the fight against terrorism into a more comprehensive approach that aims to find and implement solutions including the fields of capacity building, governance and development.

On the military side, the international security presence has seen an augmentation of Operation Barkhane with an extra 600 troops, bringing the total to 5,100. In the meantime, Barkhane's subsidiary Operation Tacuba, made of Special Forces from European countries, declared its initial operational capability in July 2020 and it is expected to become fully operational in 2021. At the same time, 2020 saw a four-year extension of the mandate of the European Union Training Mission in Mali, with the new provisions authorizing the extension of the mission's area of operations into the entire G5 Sahel region.

At the national level, the implementation of the VDP initiative in Burkina Faso was one of the major developments in 2020. Active in the northern part of Burkina Faso, the VDP militias have likely contributed to the reduction of terrorist activity in the area, but their frequent involvement in human rights violations may backfire in the long term. In the Lake Chad area, the highlight of the year was the Chadian army operation "Bohoma Anger" carried out in April 2020, which resulted in 1,000 Boko Haram militants being killed according to official statements (ACLED database saw the figures as exaggerated and revised the BH death toll to 100).

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Terrorism trends

2020 was the most intense year in terms of terrorist activity and the geographical dispersion of violence in the Sahel. Not all countries evolved to the same degree, however. While the total amount of attacks increased by 18% last year, *Burkina Faso* registered a reduction in terrorist activity of -12%.

Some concerns are related to the security situation in *Niger* where there was an increase of 50% in TVEO activity last year. This was especially severe in the last 4-month period when it increased 85% compared to the previous period. The ongoing election process could explain this trend but it is still too soon to say for certain, so the research team will continue to



monitor the security situation in Niger closely. By late 2020, information about JNIM activities in the west of Mali, in the border region of Kayes, could imply that the terrorist group might look to forward its operations into *Senegal*. This could be aligned with the conclusions in our second report. As before, the NSD-S Hub and ACSRT research teams will carefully monitor developments.

Finally, the recent disagreements between JNIM and the ISGS are particularly relevant, which provoked many clashes in 2020 following years of cohabitation and even cooperation, causing a decrease in their combat resources and the necessity to modify their lines of action.

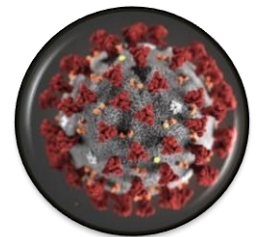
4.2. The Coup in Mali

Despite the Coup being a significant political change for the country, the ramifications for the fight against terrorism have not proven to be as relevant.

With the military agreeing to a plan for a transitional government relatively quickly, and continuing to work alongside the foreign forces to counter the TVEOs, this has meant that the operations within Mali could continue without disruption.

4.3 COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a new scenario for TVEOs in the Sahel, providing opportunities but also many challenges. The fact that Sahel's governments must turn their focus from security to addressing the public health crisis implies diverting concerns, combat resources and funds towards the new threats. The measures taken to combat the virus such as restrictions on movement and limitations to large gatherings challenge ASF operations, freedom of movement and training which provokes a loss of their effectiveness.



International counter-terrorism efforts could also be impacted by the effects of the pandemic as countries providing support in the area could downsize their deployment of troops or, at the very least, to limit their activities in accordance with the anti-COVID prevention measures.

Nevertheless, the same pandemic consequences affect the TVEOs: movement restrictions making it more demanding for terrorists to move, recruit, raise revenue or launch attacks. Measures taken to combat the virus have also reduced crowds, and therefore reduced the number of potential terrorist targets.

In the future, due to the flexibility shown by these organizations, new lines of action could be expected in order to take advantage of the opportunities and ensure their resilience to the challenges.

ANNEX A: METHODOLOGY

This report is a comprehensive study analysing the impact of terrorism in the Sahel region covering Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

Its purpose is to provide a more comprehensive vision of trends in terrorism across the region by way of progressive analyses, in order to create a broader and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of terrorism over time.

The document is jointly produced by the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) of the African Union (AU) and the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S Hub).

The Joint Reports are to be based on three fundamental pillars: Quality, Transparency and Timeliness.

This article includes statistical information drawn from terrorist attacks which occurred in the area of analysis during consecutive tri-annual periods from January 2019 till December 2020.

The joint empirical research in which the quantitative analyses are based come from two main sources. The ACSRT has worked from its own database while NSD-S Hub has used the information provided by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, but further filtered and refined with internal criteria. Several thousands of events have been analysed, one by one, and then filtered in accordance with the objective of the joint research team.

NSD-S Hub and ACSRT use “peer review” methodology to maintain transparency, quality standards, improve performance and ensure credibility. Both organizations assign one or more experts, with similar competencies to the authors of the work (peers), to evaluate the joint reports as a form of self-regulation.

The following criteria are used to filter the data to determine whether or not the event is properly defined as a terrorist attack:

1. Author: Responsibility can be attributed to any of the following terrorist groups: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Boko Haram and Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).
2. Objectives: Events in which the target are members or infrastructures of the Army, Security Forces, the Government or Administration, International Organizations or Civilian targets.³

³ Attacks against civilians which, though initially not attributable to either ethnical violence or a specific terrorist group, should be included due to a large number of victims (three or more), combined with the motivation of attack, or the means or tactics employed (IED, explosives, mortar attack or a combination of these).

3. The following events are not included:
 - a. Fight Against Terrorism (FAT) actions carried out by Armed Forces/Internal Security Forces (ASF) from G5 Sahel countries and international missions or organizations (UN, G5 SAHEL Force, OP. BARKHANE...) operating in the area.
 - b. Events clearly linked to criminal organization activities or politician/ethnic/tribal rivalries.
 - c. Events related to fighting between the various terrorist groups.

In many cases there is insufficient information to make a definitive distinction about whether it is a terrorist incident within the confines of the definition. In these cases the incidents are not included in our analysis.

Purely numerical data gathered from the area of analysis may not adequately detail the effectiveness of any national/regional FAT, either regarding the prevention of these incidents or the reduction in the capacity of terrorists to advance their agenda. It is for this reason that both quantitative and qualitative analyses have been adopted.

Due to the high relevance of the regional perspective and the relevant sensitiveness, ACRST interpretation of the data is crucial to an effective analysis of the data, and to highlight prospective scenarios.

Considering the sensitive nature of the reports, NSD-S Hub and ACSRT have undertaken to agree on a mutually acceptable set of definitions/terminology set out in ANNEX B & C. At all times the agreed terminology must respect the various regional sensitivities within the Sahel.

The scope of this report is strategical so it is not going further into operational/tactical details.

ANNEX B: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Fatalities: the number of deaths caused by the terrorist attacks, excluding terrorist fatalities.

Lethality: for the purpose of these reports, the working definition of lethality is the number of fatalities/number of attacks (f.p.a.).

Tactics, Techniques And Procedures (TTP): the TTPs included are Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), explosives or IEDs, Mortars and Complex Attacks (combining two or more TTPs).

Targets: the types of targets considered are Armed and Security Forces (ASF), Administrative personnel and facilities (ADM), Civilians (CIV) and International Organizations (IO).

Terrorist and Violent Extremist Organization (TVEO): For the purposes of this report they are considered as those organizations which justify, support or use violence to achieve any terrorism or extremist goal (normally Political, Social, Religious or Ideological).

Excluded are other violent acts. For example riots, violent demonstrations, security forces raids, etc. Although ethnical/tribal conflicts can cause a great number of victims among the civilian population, these issues are not terrorist attacks. This in no way diminishes the importance of ethnic/tribal conflicts in regional security.

Terrorist attack: all those facts consisting of the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom, or causes serious injury or death to individuals, group of people or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.

Terrorist group: those terrorist organizations defined by the UN Agreement (UN Sanctions Committee List 1267/1988), as well as those considered as such by ACSRT (in accordance with AU definition of terrorist acts) and NSD-S Hub (based on criteria such as claims, motivations, the ends pursued and the means employed, etc.)

JAMA'AT NASR AL-ISLAM WAL MUSLIMIN (JNIM): An umbrella coalition of al-Qaeda-aligned groups. Announced its existence in March 2017 in a video release featuring the leaders of its component parts: Ansar al-Din, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Mourabitoun and Katibat Macina. JNIM operates throughout Mali and into Burkina Faso and Niger, conducting complex attacks, assassinations, and improvised explosive device attacks on UN, Malian, and French forces.

ISLAMIC STATE IN THE GREATER SAHARA (ISGS): This local branch of the Islamic State group (ISIS) was at first self-proclaimed, the outgrowth of a schism within MUJAO. The group's leader, the former MUJAO commander Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, declared his adherence to the Islamic

State in May 2015. The group operated first in western Niger and Menaka, in north-eastern Mali, while also conducting several attacks in Burkina Faso near the border with Mali.

ISGS fighters were responsible for dozens of attacks against Nigerien; Malian, and Burkinabe troops, militias like the Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MSA), and Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA). It has in recent months expanded its territorial operations along the Niger-Burkina Faso border, as well as into the Gourma region south of Timbuktu in Mali.

BOKO HARAM: In 2002, Mohammad Yusuf formed Boko Haram as a Sunni religious affiliated sect to oppose Western education and establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. The group has carried out numerous attacks since 2009, including the 2011 bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Abuja, but is best known for the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl kidnapping, when the group abducted over 300 young Nigerian girls. Its primary base of operation is north eastern Nigeria, but it has conducted limited operations in Cameroon, Niger and Chad. In March 2015, Boko Haram became an affiliate of the Islamic State (IS). In August 2016, leadership struggles led to a split within Boko Haram, the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).

ISLAMIC STATE'S WEST AFRICA PROVINCE (ISWAP): In August 2016, DAESH Leadership recognized and appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the de facto leader of ISWAP, which Shekau refused to accept. Due to infighting, ISIL-West Africa split into two factions, al-Barnawi's faction (ISWAP) and Shekau's faction (Boko Haram).

ANNEX C: ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ACSRT	African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism
ADM	Administration personnel
ASF	Armed Forces/ Internal Security Forces
CIV	Civilians
CT	Counter Terrorism
FAT	Fight Against Terrorism
FPA	Fatalities per attack
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (English) Groupe autodéfense tuareg Imghad et allies (French)
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IO	International Organization
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State’s West Africa Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MLF	Macina Liberation Front
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad
MSR	Main Supply Route
MUJAO	French acronym for Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSD-S	NATO Strategic Direction South
SALW	Small Arms and Light Weapons
TTP	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
TVEO	Terrorist and Violent Extremist Organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland

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